

THE MYSTERIOUS CAVES

Priya is once again on a holiday with her brother, cousins and grandparents. This time on a hilly area. An adventurer by nature, Priya is warned in advance to keep herself from any mischief. But could she change herself so easily? Young and energetic Priya finds a companion in Shiva, the grandson of the gardener. However, they are all together when they set out on their adventure. . . Where are they heading to. . . ? Would they get into trouble again. . . ? Follow them in their trek. . .

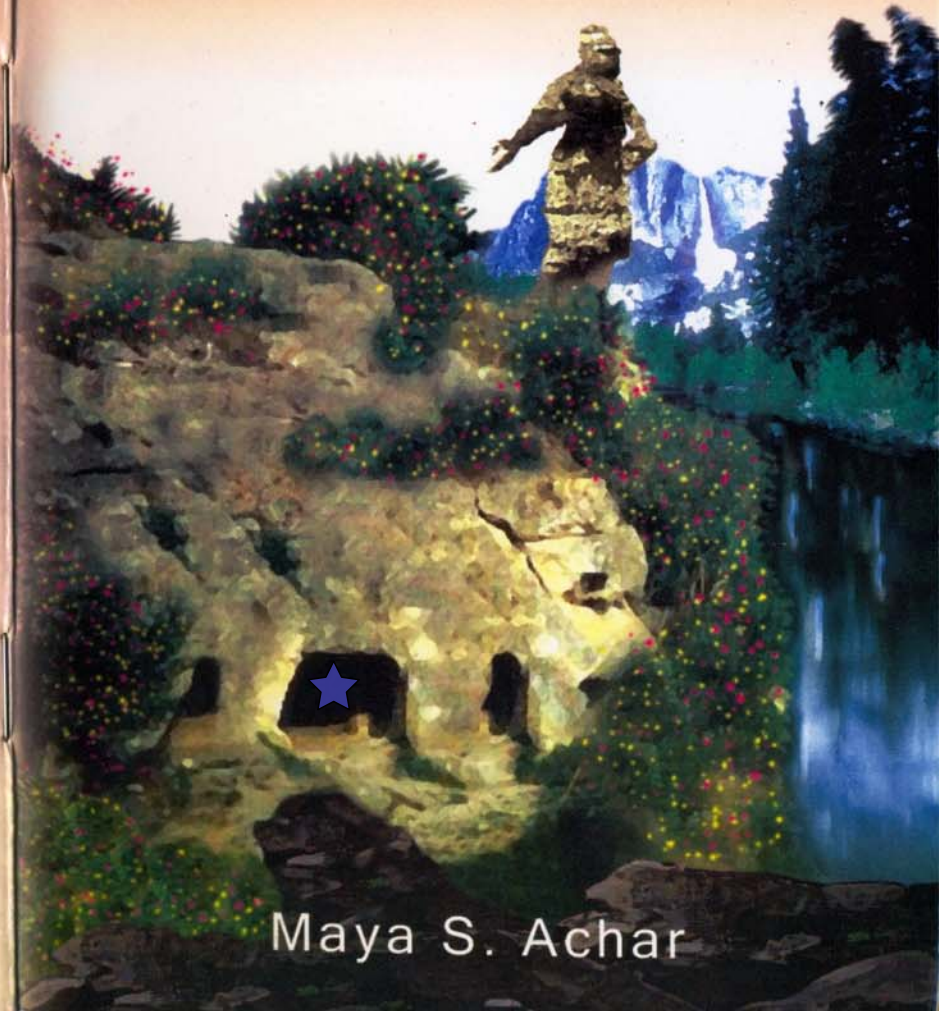
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THE MYSTERIOUS CAVES



Maya S. Achar

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Mystery of Stolen Statues

Mystery of Missing Diamonds

Mystery at the Rubber Estate

Mystery at the Beach Bungalow

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Maya S. Achar

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Chapter 1 At Khopoli

PRIYA took a deep breath of wonder and happiness.

"Wow!" she exclaimed, looking at the pretty cottage in front of her.

The other three children agreed. It was truly a pretty sight—a large, white-painted cottage, surrounded by trees on all sides. There was a large lawn in front of the house, and they could see an equally large garden behind. There was no other house in sight.

"We seem all alone here," said Priya, in wonder. "You mean to say, Daddy, that all this is yours?"

Her father laughed. "Not mine, my dear," he said. "It belongs to the company I work for. They have agreed to let it out to our family for a few days, till the painting of our own house is complete. So all of you can spend part of your holidays here."

The others had by now jumped out of the big jeep. They were standing and looking around them with pleasure. The atmosphere was peaceful and calm.

"I feel like we're the only people on earth," whispered Rashmi to Priya.

"I can see a *jhoola* and a beach umbrella," said Priya. "And look at the trees here! They seem to be a hundred years old!"

"And if you walk a little distance, you can see the hills and a few waterfalls," said Daddy, picking up a bag. "Now come on in and settle down."

The boys, Amit and Nikhil, picked up the other bags. Rashmi and Priya picked up the smaller bits of luggage. They tramped into the large porch.

"Welcome. Please come in," said an old lady, standing near the door. "I'm Sumati. I do the cooking here. Please come in. Breakfast is ready."

The children rushed in. They were, as usual, hungry. They had a hurried wash before running to the dining table.

"Why haven't Grandpa and Grandma arrived yet?" asked Priya, as they sat down to a delicious breakfast of *batata poha* and *sheera*. They were hungry even though they had stopped for snacks on the way.



"It's taken us two and a half hours to reach here," said Daddy. "Granny and Grandpa and Mummy have to visit a sick person on the way. They will be here soon."

He looked at the four children, now busy eating. Priya was eight years old, and her brother Amit was twelve. Rashmi and Nikhil were their cousins from Bangalore. Rashmi was a year older than Priya.

"Though Amit and Nikhil are the same age, why is Nikhil so fat?" asked Priya. "Nikhil, don't you get any exercise in Bangalore?"

"I'm not fat; I'm healthy," retorted Nikhil. "And why are you so skinny? Is there no food available in Mumbai?"

Priya opened her mouth to argue, but her father interrupted. "Now, don't begin to quarrel. We're in Khopoli, at the foot of the Western Ghats. The weather is lovely, and you're on vacation. Enjoy these few days without quarrelling. You're lucky that the monsoon has ended. Otherwise you wouldn't have been able to leave the house."

"It rains very heavily here, doesn't it?" asked Nikhil.

"Yes, this place is in a sort of a bowl, and the rain-bearing clouds dash against the hills and

pour all their rain into Khopoli. It rains more heavily here than in Mumbai."

"And look, the lights are switched on even though it is only 9.30 in the morning," said Rashmi. "Hardly any sunlight enters the house, does it, uncle?"

"Yes, that's because of these huge trees," said her Uncle. "Now, I'll be leaving when Granny and Grandpa arrive. But before that I want to tell you. . . ."

"We know, Daddy," said Priya in a tired voice, "Don't be naughty. Don't trouble Granny and Grandpa. Eat your food on time. Take your bath on time, etc., etc."

Daddy laughed. "And one more thing," he said, ruffling Priya's hair. "Don't get into trouble." But Priya was not listening. She was looking wide-eyed at something outside the window.

"Look, there are squirrels on that tree! Oh, look at their tails! They're so bushy!"

The four jumped up from the dining table to look at the squirrels that were running up and down the tree outside.

Yes, the few days here were certainly going to be very exciting!



Chapter 2

Exploring

GRANDPA and Granny soon arrived, along with Priya and Amit's mother. They too were very pleased with the house. It was so peaceful and quiet.

"Your lungs and blood will be refreshed by the clean, unpolluted air here," said Mummy, smiling at the happy faces of the children. "Do you know there are monkeys here too? The gardener will take you around the garden. If you want to go for any treks or walks, you must first ask him for advice."

"Why, Mum? Is it dangerous?" asked Amit curiously.

"This is a hilly area. In some places, the rocks are loose. Or you may lose your way. You must only go for short walks here."

"I want to go for long, long walks," said Priya immediately, "Or what will we do here all day?"

"You can go with Granny and Grandpa on a picnic to a pretty waterfall nearby. There is a stream there too. There are also other places you can visit. Grandpa knows everything. You must listen to whatever they say."

The children nodded.

"Did you hear me, Priya?" asked her mother sharply.

Priya looked up defiantly. "Why is it that everyone picks on me?" she asked angrily. "As if I'm the only one who gets into trouble! Don't Amit and. . ."

"We take special care of you because you're the youngest," said her mother, hugging her. "Now, Daddy and I will go back to Mumbai. If there is any problem, you can always phone. And help around the house a bit, will you?"

Daddy and she were soon off, and the children got down to their exploration. The cottage had three self-contained bedrooms; there was a huge hall, complete with a big TV set, a fridge, and a dining table. The kitchen too was spacious.

When Nikhil opened the fridge, his eyes gleamed. It certainly seemed to be well-stocked!

Priya went into the kitchen. She was curious about Sumati. Was she alone? Where did she stay?

"Oh, I stay with my children just down the main road," said Sumati, smiling at Priya's questions. "My children are all grown-up now. I come here in the morning and leave at night."

"Will you cook for so many of us all by yourself?" asked Priya. "We eat a lot, you know."

Sumati laughed. She said, "Oh, no. My daughter will come in the mornings to help me. Don't worry, little girl. You won't remain hungry."

Her doubts on the important topic of food cleared, Priya ran out of the kitchen. The others had now opened the back door and were peering out curiously. They were longing to explore.

"Do you want to look around the garden?" came a soft voice, and an old man, dressed in a 'dhoti' and 'kurta', with a turban wound round his head, came up to them. "I'm the gardener here. My name is Sridhar."

"Hello, Sridhar *kaka*," said the children. "Yes, we'd like to look around."

"Do you look after this large garden all by yourself, *kaka*?" asked Priya. "Don't you get tired?"

The old man laughed. "Twice a week, I have another man helping me out," he said. "And my grandson comes to help me when he returns from school. Here he is now, the young rascal!"

He pointed to a small boy who was coming running towards them. He was about 10 or 11 years old, dressed in shorts and a faded shirt. He had a mischievous, impish look on his face.

"I'll show them around, I'll show them around," he said excitedly. "I know all the plants and trees in this garden. Please, please, Grandpa."

"O.K.," said his grandfather, a trifle reluctantly. "But be careful—and don't lead them into any mischief!"

"Sure, sure," said the boy, whose name was Shiva. "Come, come! There's a lot to see!"

The other four followed him, surprised at his enthusiasm. As soon as they were out of sight of the old man, Shiva turned to the four children.

"This is a very exciting place," he said, his eyes shining. "I can show you some interesting walks, some interesting things. Also," he lowered his voice, "some very, very peculiar goings-on!"





Chapter 3

Shiva's Story

THE four children stared at him in astonishment.

"Peculiar goings-on?" asked Amit finally. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Do you mean here, in the house?" asked Priya, her eyes wide.

"No, not here," said Shiva. "Look, these are our prize roses. These roses have won..."

"Forget that. We can see that they're beautiful roses. What did you mean by what you said earlier?" asked Nikhil.

Shiva looked round furtively. "Perhaps I should not say anything," he said. "My grandfather will shout at me and say that I've got you into trouble."

"I think he's just making things up," said Rashmi in disgust. "There's nothing at all going on here."

"Yes," agreed Amit.

"No! I'm not telling lies," said Shiva indignantly. "There are peculiar things going on in this area. Can you see that hill there?"

The others nodded.

"Well, in that hill, there are a few caves. They're nothing much, and no one goes there."

"Oh, caves? Like Ajanta and Ellora?" asked Priya, who had just learnt about the caves in history.

"No, no! These are just ordinary ones—there are no paintings or carvings. But I've seen some very well-dressed, rich people coming there quietly."

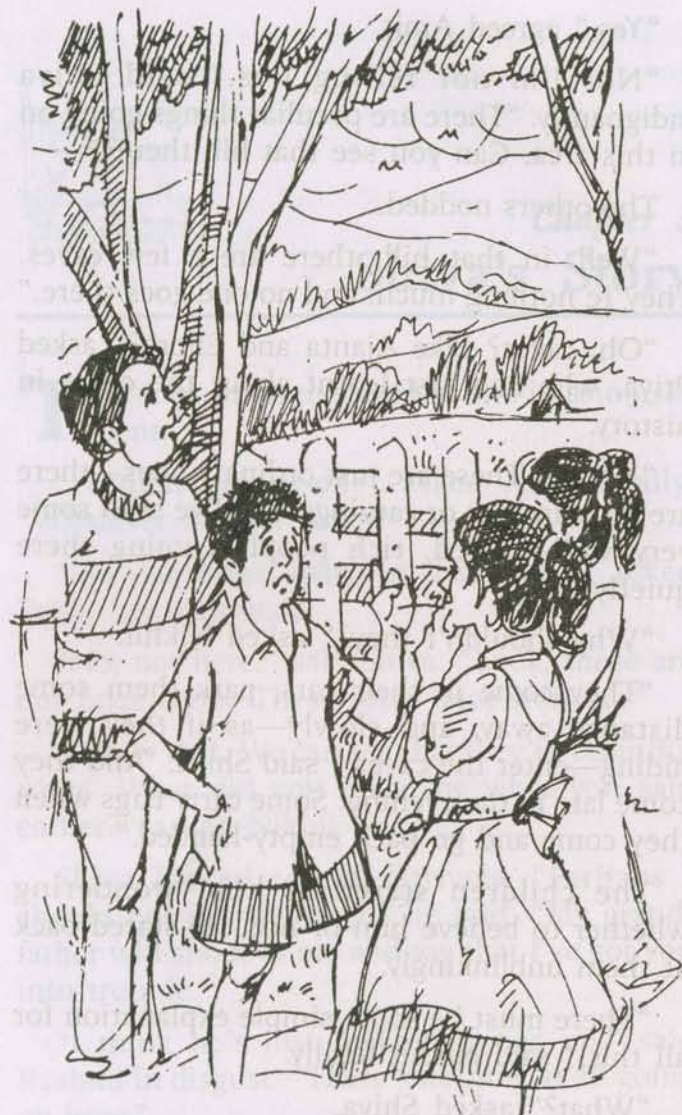
"Why shouldn't they?" asked Nikhil.

"They come in their cars, park them some distance away, and slowly—as if they were hiding—enter the caves," said Shiva. "And they come late in the evening. Some carry bags when they come and go back empty-handed."

The children stared at him, wondering whether to believe him or not. He stared back at them unblinkingly.

"There must be some simple explanation for all this," said Nikhil finally.

"What?" asked Shiva.



"Well... I can't think of anything at the moment," said Nikhil sheepishly.

"Why should anyone walk over stones and through thorny bushes, uphill, merely to go into some old caves where there's nothing—and come out soon afterwards?" asked Shiva. "And I've seen this happening several times," he added.

The children were now on the lawn, and they sat down on the chairs beneath the large beach umbrella. Shiva stood near them, almost dancing in his excitement.

"Have you gone into the caves and looked around?" asked Amit.

"Yes," said Shiva. "But not right inside—it's dark, and I don't have a torch. I was hoping—if you are interested—you might have a torch. . . ."

"No," said Amit firmly. "We don't want to get into any trouble. We don't want to see the cave."

Shiva looked at him, disappointed.

"Oh, Amit, please, can't we at least see what's there?" asked Priya. "What harm can there be in just looking at a cave? It's public property, isn't it?"

"Priya!" said Amit, a warning note in his voice. "You know what Mum said. If you disobey us,

we'll have to tell Granny, and then she won't even let you leave the house."

"But I'm not saying that we should do anything. Can't we just look at the caves when we're on our walks? How can we get into trouble then? We..."

"No," said Amit again, very firmly. "And Priya, there are always bats in caves. And caves smell."

Priya looked uncertain. She hated bats and all creepy, crawly creatures.

"And Shiva," said Nikhil, "don't talk to us about all this again. Just tell us where to go for ordinary, harmless walks."

"All right," said Shiva, crestfallen. "Come along then. You can have a look at the rest of the garden."



Chapter 4 Settling Down

IT was lunchtime when Shiva finished his tour of the garden. He was a good guide, and certainly knew a lot about the plants and animals around. He frightened Priya tremendously when he showed her the numerous holes in the ground.

"No, they are not snake-holes. There are crabs in them."

"Crabs!" Priya screamed. "You mean the ones with those sharp claws which can pinch?"

"Yes," said Shiva. "But don't worry. The moment they hear someone coming they scuttle back into their holes. You can see them only if you're very quiet. These are land crabs."

"Don't the people eat them?" asked Nikhil.

"Some do," said Shiva.

Priya shuddered and after that was very careful about where she put her feet. She was

more noisy than usual too. "I want to warn the crabs," she explained.

"There's Granny," said Rashmi. "Let's tell her about the crabs."

Their grandmother had come into the garden and was collecting the white, sweet-smelling 'mogra' flowers.

"I'll string them into garlands," she told the children, "just like I do in Bangalore. Are you hungry again?"

"Yes," said the children immediately, and Granny sighed.

"When are you children not hungry?" she murmured to herself, thankful that Sumati was in charge of the kitchen.

The food Sumati cooked for lunch was quite different from the normal food the children ate at home, and they relished it.

"It's wholesome, nutritious food," said Granny. "You'll not get burgers or pizzas here."

Priya's face fell. "But. . .," she began to protest.

"If you're good, we can go into the town and get them," finished Grandpa. "But if you're bad. . ."

"We're never bad, Grandpa," said Priya, in a goody-goody voice. "Do you know what Shiva told us today? He said. . ."

Immediately, the other three children began to talk loudly, drowning Priya's voice. She stared at them in anger, and opened her mouth to complain, but the sweet dish, '*rava kheer*', brought in by Sumati, distracted her.

"This is my special '*kheer*'," said Sumati in her gentle voice. "Taste it."

It was wonderful, and the children finished off the entire bowl, much to Granny's dismay.

"What is the sweet dish for tonight?" asked Priya.

"There will be no sweet dish at night," said Granny firmly. "If anything remains from the afternoon, you can have it. If not, you can just have some chocolates."

It was as they were relaxing in the bedroom after their heavy meal that Priya remembered the episode at lunchtime.

"Why did you cut me off when I was talking to Grandpa?" she asked indignantly. "You were rude and mean."

"We didn't want you to blab about those caves," said Amit. "You know how you give out secrets."

"I wasn't going to talk about the caves," said Priya, even more indignantly. "I was going to tell him about the crabs."

"Oh," said Amit.

"At least you can say you're sorry," said Priya.

"Well, I'm not."

Priya got up angrily. "You're really mean," she said, and walked out of the room in a huff. The others laughed. They knew that Priya would soon forget her anger. And sure enough, she came bouncing back after some time, quite excited.

"The squirrels here are quite tame," she exclaimed. "Do you know, I took some peanuts from the kitchen to offer them. And. . ."

"And they sat on your palm and ate them, I suppose," said Nikhil sarcastically.

"No," said Priya, regretfully. "But they sat nearby and ate them. At least, one of them did. He ran off only when I moved. But I'll be able to tame them and make them sit on my palm before I leave. I bet I can do that."

The others stared at her, quite believing what she said. One could never say what might happen with a girl like Priya!



Chapter 5

An Interesting Walk

THE next day the four children decided to go for a short walk. It was a lovely day, cool and pleasant.

"You can go after lunch, so that I can have a peaceful afternoon nap," said Grandma. "And you can take some snacks with you. And of course, take Shiva along."

They nodded, eyes sparkling. This was what a holiday should be like! No studies, no homework—only fun and food.

'And perhaps a mystery,' thought Priya to herself.

But she did not say anything to the others. They would certainly shout at her, for trying to get them all into trouble!

"Shiva!" she called out just before setting off.

The boy came running up.

"Take us towards those caves," she whispered. "And don't tell anyone that I asked you to."

Shiva nodded, his eyes shining. He liked Priya—she had the same adventurous spirit that he had.

"Today I'll take you on a simple, short walk—just an hour uphill, some rest, and then back," he announced importantly.

To Priya's surprise, he took a route which was in a direction opposite to the caves. She looked at him inquiringly, and he nodded reassuringly.

"What are you two planning?" asked Nikhil suspiciously, seeing this exchange of looks.

Priya ignored him and skipped along ahead.

The children went up the hill, panting at a steep bit, and laughing when they slipped down some loose stones.

"Hey, Shiva, I hope you know the way—we seem to be going round and round," exclaimed Amit.

"Don't worry—I would know the way with my eyes closed," said Shiva. "I'm trying to take you by an easy route. We'll soon reach the table land. We would have reached it in 15 minutes if we had taken the difficult route."

"Well, next time take us by the difficult route—this is like walking on a road," grumbled Nikhil.

They soon reached the table land. It was a beautiful place, flat, green and grassy with a wonderful view of the surrounding area. Here and there they could see little waterfalls. It was quiet and peaceful.

"Are there no visitors here?" asked Amit in surprise. "No tourists?"

"No," said Shiva. "What would tourists do here for entertainment? There's nothing to do except to sit and look at the hills around."

After a while, when they had finished off most of the snacks they had brought along and played some games, Priya pulled Shiva aside.

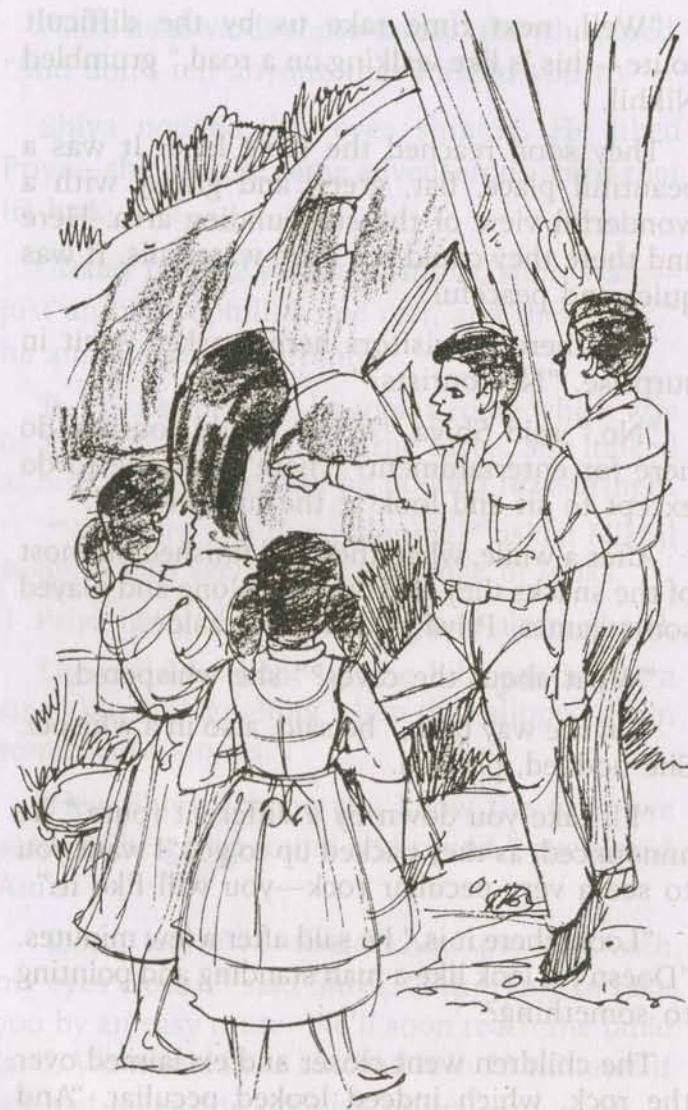
"What about the caves?" she whispered.

"On the way back," he said, also in a whisper. She nodded, pleased.

"I'll take you down by a different route," he announced, as they packed up to go. "I want you to see a very peculiar rock—you will like it."

"Look, there it is," he said after a few minutes. "Doesn't it look like a man standing and pointing to something?"

The children went closer and exclaimed over the rock, which indeed looked peculiar. "And



behind you are the caves—the ones I told you about,” continued Shiva, lowering his voice dramatically.

The children turned curiously.

“Come on, let’s go inside,” said Priya, and before anyone could reply, she had run off.

“Look at those cigarette stubs—people from the town have come here,” said Shiva, pointing to some stubs just inside the cave. Amit picked up one. Yes, it was a foreign brand. “In this area, no one would smoke cigarettes—they are too costly, and the people are too poor.”

They walked into the first cave. There were about three openings next to one another. One was fairly large, the other two extremely small. It was gloomy and dark inside, and utterly boring. There seemed to be no sign of any life at all.

“What a peculiar smell,” exclaimed Priya. “What is it?”

“Bats,” said Shiva. “But don’t worry, they’re harmless.”

They followed him inside, wrinkling their noses.

“Are these the caves you were telling us about?” asked Nikhil. “There’s nothing here.”

Without replying, Shiva beckoned to them to follow him. He went deeper and deeper into the cave.

The children were surprised. They had thought that the cave was very small; but it had small openings like doorways, which led deeper inside. Only someone going right inside the cave would have known of this. One opening was also covered by some type of a creeper.

"If Shiva had not shown it to us, we would never have known it was there," whispered Nikhil.

It was now extremely dark, and the children could barely make out anything.

"Come on, let's go," said Rashmi suddenly. "I don't like this place."

"Yes, but just look at this! There's a door here—a door made of wood. Inside a rock cave! And it looks new, too, and see that lock on the door? It's also new. It's shining!" said Shiva triumphantly.

The others stared in surprise. Yes, what he had said was true. Besides, the lock was a very modern one. 'Just like the ones we have at home,' thought Amit.

"All this was not there three months back," said Shiva. "Now don't you think that's suspicious?"

"Come on, let's go," said Rashmi again, dragging Nikhil away. They all went out, their shoes making a lot of noise.

"Who's there? How dare you come inside my cave?" came a harsh voice suddenly from somewhere. The children jumped in fright. The voice was most unexpected. Priya clutched Amit tightly.

Suddenly, in front of them, blocking what little light was coming from the entrance, stood a large and menacing figure.

"How dare you come inside my cave?" thundered the man, raising his stick. "Go away from here—or else. . . ."

The children ran out in fright, panting and gasping. They came out into the open, and looked behind.

The man was standing at the entrance, glaring and waving his stick at them. He was truly a terrifying figure, dressed in some loose black clothes, with lots of beads round his neck and hands. He had a dirty looking beard, and long, uncombed hair.

"Get out, and don't come back!" he shouted.

The children ran down the hillside, frightened. Who was he?



Chapter 6

A Flashing of Lights

THE five did not speak till they had reached an open, grassy place far away from the cave.

"Let's sit," said Nikhil, panting, and they all flopped down. Rashmi looked fearfully behind her. She hated it when people shouted loudly at her.

"Whew!" said Amit. "What a horrible man! What's he doing here?"

"He probably lives there," said Nikhil. "And doesn't want us to interfere in his life."

"No," said Shiva. "I know that man. His name is Kallu. He has a small house in the town. So why should he want to live in a cave?"

"Maybe to pray or something," said Priya.

"Huh! He's got a bad reputation—he drinks and uses bad language, and gets into quarrels," said Shiva, scornfully. "He's not the type to sit and pray in some dark cave. No, if he's here, then there is something bad going on. Illegal."

"Anyway, let's forget him," said Nikhil. "And let's have some water." He was looking at Rashmi as he spoke. She looked pale; her hands were cold with fear. Priya too had become very quiet. He decided to change the subject.

"Look at that monkey there," he said. "With a baby! And look at how the baby is clinging to its Mamma!"

Laughing, they gave the monkey some leftovers, and went back home. The boys decided not to discuss the cave and the man any more. Rashmi was still looking frightened.

They spent the rest of the evening playing badminton on the large lawn, swinging on the *jhoola*, and watching cartoons when it became dark.

That night, both Priya and Rashmi dreamt of huge men in black following them and shouting at them. Priya even screamed in her sleep.

The next day, Grandpa and Grandma had some sightseeing planned for them.

"First we visit a famous temple nearby, then have lunch at a restaurant, and then go to the waterfall," said Grandpa.

"Yay!" shouted the children. They knew that when they went out with their grandparents, they could eat whatever they liked. They never said

'no' to ice creams and pastries like Mum and Dad sometimes did!

After a wonderful meal, they went to the waterfall. Luckily, there were hardly any people around. "That's because it's a weekday," explained Grandpa. "On holidays, and during weekends, the place is packed with picnic groups from Mumbai. It's ideal for a day picnic."

"But unfortunately, they leave behind a lot of litter," said Grandma.

"Our teachers in school keep telling us the importance of cleanliness," said Priya. "And they tell us to spread the message to everyone."

After getting wet in the spray of the waterfall—they certainly could not stand under it since it gushed down with too much force—they sat on the large stones in the middle of the shallow stream. They thoroughly enjoyed themselves, splashing water on each other, and getting drenched. Even Grandpa and Grandma!

"If any one of you goes down with a cold, it's back to Mumbai tomorrow," threatened Grandma.

"And what if you catch a cold, Grandma?" asked Priya.

"I never catch colds," began Grandma. Suddenly her nose began twitching. "Atishoo!" she sneezed, and the others roared with laughter.

They were pleasantly tired when they reached home. Sumati had a piping hot tea ready for them—hot 'puris' and 'bhaji', and some delicious spicy local dish. She had also fried tiny round potato chips. The children stuffed themselves. How did food taste so wonderful on a holiday?

They spent the evening just loitering around. Grandma spread a couple of large, thick blankets on the lawn, so the children could lie down if they wished. Priya was, naturally, the first to flop down.

"Supposing a crab puts its pincers through the blanket and pinches Priya?" said Nikhil.

Priya gave a loud squeal, and sat up immediately. "Can they really do that?" she squeaked. "I'm not sitting here!"

"He was just teasing you, silly," said Amit. "No crab will dare to poke its nose out when we're moving just over it's head! Sit down!"

But Priya refused to sit on the ground again, preferring to sit on a chair under the beach umbrella.

That night, Priya dreamt of waterfalls and crabs and monster-like men, and woke up in the middle of the night, her heart beating fast.

'I'll have a drink of water,' she thought to herself.

It was as she was going towards the fridge that she saw it. She happened to look out of the kitchen window. She was surprised to see lights blinking continuously at irregular intervals, as if in some sort of code.

‘That’s where that cave is,’ she thought excitedly. ‘Yes, that’s the position of the cave. I must wake up the boys!’

She ran into their room. “Amit! Nikhil! Get up! There are lights flashing in the cave!” she whispered excitedly.



Chapter 7 Another Walk

THE boys got up with a start. Priya kept shaking them and talking in fierce whispers. Finally, she dragged them into the dining room.

“Look at those lights. Aren’t they coming from the area of the cave?” she hissed.

The boys rubbed their eyes and stared. Yes, they were indeed coming from that direction.

“It seems to be some sort of message,” said Amit. “Look, Nikhil, there are three flashes, then a pause; then two flashes and a pause; then again three flashes.”

They watched, and the lights began flashing again. Three, two and three flashes. The same sequence was repeated once again. After that there was nothing—just utter darkness.

“The signalling seems to be over,” said Nikhil. “Priya, was it going on for a long time before you woke us?”

"I don't know. I just saw the lights and ran to call you," said Priya. "But I was right, wasn't I?"

"It seems so," said Amit. "It certainly was a signal. But to whom, and why?"

"Maybe we should go and see tomorrow?" said Priya hopefully.

"Priya!"

"OK, OK. But you can't say that I was responsible for the flashing of the lights," said Priya.

Wondering over the incident, they went back to bed. The boys spent a thrilling fifteen minutes discussing it all.

The next morning, after breakfast, naturally that was the first thing they spoke about. They were sitting in the middle of the huge lawn and no one could possibly overhear them—except the crabs!

"Was it all a dream?" asked Amit.

"Was what a dream?" said Rashmi.

"The lights, silly," said Nikhil.

"What lights?" asked Rashmi in surprise.

"The lights we saw flashing last night."

"Last night? I never saw. . . ."

"You were asleep," interrupted Priya. "I saw lights flashing from the direction of the cave at

about 2 o'clock last night, and I woke up the boys."

Rashmi looked at her in astonishment. "Why didn't you wake me up?" she demanded.

"We forgot," said Priya. "And anyway, there was no time."

Rashmi looked at them quietly for a few moments; then she got up. "I think you're mean, all of you," she said, in a choked sort of voice. "You never thought of me, did you?"

The boys looked surprised; then uncomfortable. "Here, it was not like that at all," said Amit, "It all happened so fast that there was no time to think."

Rashmi did not say anything, but walked away quietly towards the chairs. There were tears in her eyes, and the others looked at each other guiltily.

"There's Shiva!" said Nikhil gladly, as he heard the boy's whistle.

"Come, Rashmi, let's go for a walk," said Amit, getting up. "We'll go wherever you wish."

"Let's go towards that cave," said Priya.

"No one asked you," retorted Amit.

Unfortunately for them, Grandma wouldn't allow them to go out before lunch. "You can

have an early lunch. After that, go off with snacks," she said.

There was nothing left to do except sit on the lawn and discuss with Shiva what they had seen.

"Do you believe me now?" asked Shiva triumphantly. "I told you that there was something peculiar going on!"

"We'll go and scout around today," said Amit. In their excitement, all of them forgot that they had decided not to take any part in this particular mystery!

Shiva hesitated. "I have one request to make," he said. "Can I . . . can I . . . bring my dog along too?"

"Dog? You have a dog? And you didn't tell us?" squealed Priya. "Where is he? We love dogs!"

Shiva looked thrilled. He got up. "I'll get him."

Within a few moments, he was back. At his heels was a dog, little more than a puppy. It was a stray of no particular breed, black and brown and white, with a large black patch on each of its eyes. It had a naughty look on its face as it gambolled behind Shiva.

"Oh, he's adorable!"

"How sweet!"

The children exclaimed over him happily.

"What's his name?" asked Priya.

"Tiger," said Shiva. "He's as fierce as a tiger when he's angry!"

Tiger looked anything but angry now, as he played around happily with the children. They were thrilled at this addition to their gang.

After being made to rest for an hour after lunch, they left for their walk. As they neared the cave, Tiger was put on an old leash by Shiva. As usual, the area was deserted, and the children hid behind a huge bush to watch. They did not know what it was they were watching for; they just did not want to come into contact with the horrible black-clad man, Kallu.

Suddenly Tiger began growling, and Shiva put a hand on his collar. The children peered over the bushes. To their surprise, they saw a well-dressed man and woman come panting up the hill from the other side, the side of the main road.

The man gave a short whistle as they approached the cave. Immediately, the black-robed man emerged.

"Only a few days of this left now, Kallu," grunted the newcomer. "Here, take this."



The man and the woman put their bags into Kallu's hands, and followed him into the cave.

"Come on, we too can go," said Shiva excitedly. "Only us boys! They will go in and look at all the stuff there. They'll be inside for at least half an hour. Come on!"

Without thinking, their hearts beating fast, the boys jumped up and ran behind Shiva. Tiger was left behind with Priya.

As the girls watched with indignation, the boys entered the cave and vanished.

"Well!" said Priya angrily. "What cheek! To leave us behind with nothing to do! Now they'll have all the fun!"





Chapter 8

Some Discoveries

AND what were the boys doing?

After they left the girls, they went softly towards the entrance of the cave. They could hear the voices of the people inside, and they followed the sound quietly at a distance.

After a couple of turns, they suddenly saw a bright light at the end.

"The door's open," said Shiva excitedly. "Come on, let's get closer!"

They went closer and peered in. To their surprise, there were many things stacked up neatly inside the cave. The man and woman were opening various packages and checking them.

"See those things shining—they may be made of gold," whispered Amit. "I wish we could go closer."

"No!" said Nikhil. "We must not take any chances."

They watched quietly, hardly daring to breathe. They could clearly hear little bits of conversation.

"This painting. . .," they heard the man's voice. "At least 10 lakhs."

"This statue. . .," came the woman's voice, "... dispose of it soon."

"France and Germany," came the man's voice again.

". . . a few days time," came the woman's voice.

"They'll probably empty the place within a few days," whispered Amit.

"Shh!" said Nikhil. "They may be able to hear us."

Then, even before the children could realize it, the people inside the cave had turned and were walking towards the door.

"Run!" hissed Shiva. "Quick!"

He ran out quietly, and the others followed.

It was at the final turn that it happened. Nikhil, who was the last one, had turned back to see what the men were doing. He did not see the walking stick and metal tumbler kept in a corner. He dashed against them, and tripped.

Crash! The sound of the tumbler on the stone floor sounded loud. It echoed, and seemed to spread all around the caves.

The children were terrified. Nikhil picked himself up quickly, and began to run.

"Who's there?" came a sharp shout from the cave. "Who's it?"

"Fast!" whispered Shiva. "Run quickly!"

Before they could reach the entrance to the cave, they heard another crash.

"They too have fallen down," said Shiva gleefully.

The boys came out into the sunlight, and ran towards the bushes where the girls were hidden.

"Come on, run," said Shiva, "I know a hiding place nearby!"

"What. . .," began Priya.

But there was no time for explanations. Without looking left or right, they ran up a steep, unknown path behind Shiva.

"Come here," he said after a couple of minutes, and pushed aside some bushes. To the children's surprise, there was a tiny cave there too. It was more like a huge hole in the hillside than a cave, and it was completely screened by the bushes.

The next moment, they were all inside the cave, and the bushes had sprung back into place.

Just in time, they heard the sound of running feet, and Kallu's black clad figure came into view through the little gaps in the bushes. He stood there looking around. Then, to the children's horror, he began walking directly towards them. Had he seen them? Did he know about that hiding place? What would he do if he caught them? Perhaps he would throw them down the hillside in anger! Rashmi put a hand over her mouth, sure that she would scream.

He came nearer and nearer, till finally, he was too close for the children to see him fully. They could only see the black robe. Priya was sure he could hear her heart, it was beating so loudly. She had only to put out a hand to touch him.

"Please, please make him go," she prayed. If he just bent down and parted the bushes, they would be seen.

"Come back, you!" he shouted suddenly. "I'll give you a good thrashing! Giving me so much trouble!"

The children jumped. Had they been discovered?





Chapter 9

The Children Lose their Way

"COME here!" came Kallu's voice again, and then they heard a loud and indignant barking.

"Tiger!" muttered Shiva. "That's Tiger!"

Kallu moved away from the bushes. "I'll teach you to come inside my cave!" he roared.

There came the sound of more footsteps, and the well-dressed man and woman came panting up the small slope.

"Who was it?" asked the man sharply.

"Just that silly dog which is barking there," said Kallu with a laugh. "Come on. Let's go back. We won't waste any more time. Anyway, it's only a matter of a few days now."

Giving Tiger dirty looks, the trio went back the way they had come. Tiger sent a volley of

rude barks after them. The children heaved a sigh of relief. What a narrow escape it had been!

"Tiger! Come here!" said Shiva in a loud whisper, as they crawled out from behind the bushes.

Tiger came rushing towards them, his tail wagging nineteen to the dozen. The children hugged and patted him, making a big fuss over him. He enjoyed himself thoroughly, lying on his back, begging to be tickled.

"Come on, we'll go back by a different path, not past the caves," said Shiva.

Half an hour later, they were back home, much to Grandma's surprise.

"What happened? Did you get bored with your walk?" she asked them.

The children looked at one another. Bored? It had been anything but boring!

They sat on the lawn, under the shade of some trees, away from the house, and discussed things thoroughly. The boys told the girls all that they had heard and seen in the cave.

Thinking that the children were bored, Grandma and Grandpa arranged for an outing that evening.

"There's a lovely place, about half an hour's drive from here, up the ghats," said Grandma.

"It's called Echo Point. You get a lovely view of the mountains from there."

"No, Grandma, we're tired of views," said Priya.

"And there's a lovely little restaurant there which serves wonderful fast food—lovely double ice cream sundaes. So shall we go?" continued Grandma, with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Yes, Grandma," chorused four voices, and Grandma smiled.

"I thought so," she said.

They spent a wonderful evening at Echo Point, and returned home late, bursting with food. It had certainly been a wonderful place!

The next morning, Shiva came running to them. He looked upset. "I cannot take you for a walk—an aunt of mine from the next village is visiting," he said, with disgust on his face. "But I will give you some directions to go to a new place."

"Not near the caves," said Amit firmly.

"No, this will be on another hill," said Shiva, and explained the route.

That afternoon, after lunch, as usual, the four went for their walk. Shiva was not with them, but he had left Tiger behind. "I'm sure he'll help you," he'd said proudly.

The others looked at Tiger's happy but unintelligent face doubtfully. They were quite sure that Tiger would be useless in any emergency! But anyway, he was a wonderful companion: cheerful and happy, and always ready for a game.

They allowed him to lead the way; he gambolled along confidently, turning around now and then to check if they were following. The children walked along happily; this particular route had a lot of flowers and pretty-looking stones. Priya and Rashmi sang songs loudly, arguing over the words.

It took them awhile to realize that they had lost their way.

"I don't think that this is the hill that Shiva was talking about," said Amit uneasily, as he stared at the pile of huge rocks in front of him. "He was talking about some shady trees and view, but here. . . ."

"Oh, what does it matter?" asked Priya impatiently. "Who wants to see some more views? Anyway, we can go there tomorrow. Let's sit in the shade of those rocks and have our snacks. I'm hungry. Then we can explore this place."



The others nodded. After all, they had wanted a nice walk. And they had had one.

There was a cool breeze blowing, and the children leant against the rocks, munching contentedly. Soon the snacks were over. Slowly their eyes closed, and they dozed off.

All but Priya. Priya was busy weaving a garland of some leaves and tying it around Tiger's neck.

"You're the king of all you survey, Tiger," she told him solemnly. "This is the garland of victory."

"Woof!" said Tiger, panting cheerfully. Suddenly he got up and ran off behind the rocks.

"Hi, Tiger, wait!" called out Priya. "That garland may be too tight. Let me loosen it!" But Tiger did not come back. Priya looked anxious. Supposing he choked because of it? It would be all her fault.

"Tiger!" she called out, getting up. "Tiger! Come here!"

She too ran behind the rocks, calling out to him. There was no sign of him, and Priya continued to run. The other three, totally unaware of what was happening, continued to sleep peacefully.



Chapter 10

What Happened to Priya

NIKHIL woke up with a start. A bee was buzzing very close to his ear.

"Shoo!" he said, irritated.

But the bee would not stop buzzing, and Nikhil was forced to open his eyes and move away. He looked at his watch. He had been asleep for about ten minutes. He looked at the other two. They were still asleep. Rashmi had her mouth open. He tickled her face with a blade of grass, and she got up with a grunt.

"Wake up, sleepy heads! Let's explore," he said.

Amit got up and rubbed his eyes. "I'm feeling too lazy to explore. Let's relax," he said.

"Where's Priya?" asked Nikhil.

They looked around. There was no sign of her.

"She has probably taken Tiger for a walk," said Amit lazily. "I hope she does not lose her way."

"Tiger will bring her back," said Rashmi.

"Huh! You have a very high opinion of that silly dog," said Amit. "He's sweet, but not smart. Let's call out."

They all called out, but there was no response. "I hope we don't have to go in search of her in this hot sun," said Amit irritably. "This is just like her!"

"Oh, she'll come back. We'll wait," said Nikhil, lying down again.

Another fifteen minutes passed; then they heard panting, and Tiger threw himself on them, wagging his tail violently.

"Hello, Tiger, so you're back! Where's Priya?" asked Amit sleepily.

"Woof!" said Tiger.

"I see," said Amit solemnly. "Woof to you too!"

"Woof!" said Tiger again, trying to lick Amit's face. Amit rolled over, trying to escape the wet tongue.

"Go away!"

Tiger sat down near them, panting loudly. Rashmi got up suddenly, looking worried.

"Priya! Priya!" she called out.

There was no answer. "Where is Priya? Do you think she could have fallen down and hurt herself? I think we should search for her."

The boys murmured something. They did not feel like getting up.

"Nikky! Amit! Get up. Let's search for Priya," said Rashmi urgently. "You know how easily she gets into trouble."

The boys sat up immediately. Of course they knew it! They began to call out loudly to Priya. There was no answer.

"Tiger, where is she? Search for her," said Nikhil.

"Woof!" said Tiger happily, wagging his tail. They shook their heads. He was certainly not a bloodhound who could sniff out the trail of a lost person!

They packed up their things. "We must keep together, or we'll all get lost," said Nikhil.

They went down, following the route they had come by. Priya had liked the little yellow flowers that grew there. Perhaps she was collecting them.

But Priya was not there. Neither was she on the route on the opposite side, the downward route.

"What shall we do now?" asked Amit worriedly. "Perhaps she lost her way and went back home. Should we go and see, and tell Grandma and Grandpa?"

"They'll get worried, and they can't search for her. They can't climb these hills," said Rashmi.

"You know what? I think we should go down and call Shiva," said Amit. "He knows this place very well—do you remember the cave we hid in when Kallu was searching for us?"

"Yes," said the others. "Come on, then. Let's go."

But before they could start, Tiger set up a loud barking, his little tail wagging fiercely. The children looked at each other hopefully.

"Tiger!" came a voice suddenly. It was Shiva.

"My aunt cancelled her programme," he said happily. "But you had left by the time I reached your house just now. By the way, you've come to the wrong hill. Did you know that?"

The children nodded. "Oh Shiva, did you see Priya anywhere?" Rashmi asked.

"Priya? Didn't she come with you?" asked Shiva in surprise. "No, I haven't seen her. Where is she?"

"That's what we too wish to know," said Amit grimly. He told Shiva what had happened. "And we were coming to you for help," he said finally.

"Don't worry. I know this place very well. I'll find her in no time," said Shiva confidently.

But would he?



Chapter 11

Priya's Story

AND what was Priya doing? When the other children were discussing things, poor Priya was sitting all alone in a dark cave, her hands tied behind her back to a pillar, a hanky round her mouth. In front of her, muttering and grumbling, Kallu was packing the various items which were still in the cave.

And how had Priya reached that particular cave? Though the children did not realize it, they had climbed up the same hill with the mysterious caves, but from a different side. So the place where they had rested for snacks was actually the back of the same caves!

When Priya had followed Tiger, he had run through a narrow opening into a tunnel.

"Tiger!" she called out, running behind him. "Come here! I want to loosen that garland!"

But Tiger, in a playful mood, ran on and on ahead. Priya, not realizing it, kept running behind him too, shouting loudly.

She stopped when Tiger stopped suddenly and began to bark. The bark echoed eerily in the area.

"Girl! What are you doing here? Where did you come from?" roared a voice, and Priya screamed in fear as a bearded black-robed figure appeared suddenly in front of her, holding a torch.

"You!" she exclaimed, when she saw him clearly. "Kallu!"

He looked surprised. "How do you know me? Who are you?" he asked.

"I . . . I . . . don't know you," stammered Priya, "I'm going!"

She turned quickly to run, but Kallu was quicker.

"Wait a moment," he said, grabbing her arm. "How do you know my name?"

"I . . . I . . . don't know. Maybe I heard someone call out to you," she stammered, trying to twist away from his grasp.

"Who? I've never seen you before. Where do you stay?"

"In that bungalow down there—No. 1. We've come for a holiday."

"Ah! The bungalow where old Shridhar is the gardener! But tell me—how did you know my name?"



Priya remained silent, and he suddenly twisted her arm.

"Oww! You're hurting me! You're mean! You're a thief! You and those other city people! And you hide all those costly things here! We know all about you," said Priya.

Kallu looked at her in silence for a moment, his mouth open in shock. Then he dragged her deeper into the tunnel, till they came to a sort of door. This led to a cave with a small light inside.

As soon as Priya saw the cave with all sorts of things stacked up here and there, she knew it was the same cave that the boys had seen earlier.

Kallu dragged her in, pulled out a rope, and tied her to a stone pillar.

"Now tell me," he said dusting his hands. "Tell me everything, or I'll leave you here—for ever and ever, without any food!"

Frightened, Priya told him all that had happened. Kallu looked more and more astonished; finally he looked very angry.

"Interfering children!" he growled. "Now I suppose I'll have to pack up fast and get away from here, before they come in search of you. Wait a minute, I've got an idea. I'll hold you hostage."

To Priya's horror, he took out a gun from his loose shirt. Then, as she began to cry loudly, he tied a hanky round her mouth.

"Shut up!" he shouted. "And wait there quietly till I finish my work. Or I'll give you a thrashing."

He picked up a mobile phone lying nearby and spoke quickly into it. Priya could hear him clearly—he was telling his friends to come and pick up the stolen stuff immediately.

"Luckily, most of it has already been taken," he growled. "What shall I do with the girl?" The person on the line said something to him, and a big smile spread over his face.

"Yes, they're probably rich," he said, "Yes, yes."

He switched off the phone and looked at Priya again. "It's a good thing that you came here," he said, "Now I can earn some more money!"

Tears flowing down her face, Priya looked at him. How did she get into such situations? All that she had done was play with Tiger! Now everyone would blame her and shout at her, as usual! But was she really in the wrong?



Chapter 12 Captured!

"WE'VE searched all these places nearby, Shiva," said Amit worriedly. "I think we should tell Grandpa or call the police."

"The police! No!" said Shiva, frightened.

"What about these rocks here? Could she have got stuck somewhere inside? We must see," said Nikhil.

Shiva looked even more frightened. "No one enters the caves from this side," he whispered. "You know that this is the other entrance to Kallu's cave, don't you? Well, they say that there's a ghost there which guards it and kills everyone who enters it!"

"Rubbish!" said Nikhil briskly, seeing the fear on Rashmi's face. "There are no such things as ghosts! But...but...does it mean that we've climbed the same hill, from some other side?"

"Yes, it's quite confusing," said Shiva. "Anyway, if she has gone there, that's the end."

The ghost must have taken her."

"Shiva!" said Amit sharply, "Don't be so foolish! We'll just have a look there—and then go and inform Grandpa. He'll have to organize a search party or something."

They went into the jumble of huge rocks, with Tiger leading them, and Shiva following reluctantly at a distance.

"Look! Isn't this Priya's hanky?" said Amit, pouncing on a small square of cloth fluttering in the breeze. "Yes, it is! So she did come this way!"

"Let's follow Tiger! He seems to be leading us somewhere," said Nikhil.

They went on for a few minutes, then stopped as a sound came from Shiva. "No, no!" he said in a strangled voice. "Don't go any further! The ghost!"

"Tiger has already gone in—and look, he's out again," said Amit. "If the ghost does not want him, it may not want us too! You can wait here, Shiva. If we're not back in about 15 minutes, go down for help." Shiva nodded. He wanted to help Priya; he liked her very much, but he was simply too terrified to enter the caves.

The other children entered the gloomy tunnel, their hearts beating fast. They could hardly see

Tiger now. Was Priya here somewhere, fallen and hurt? Should they call out to her? Or was there really a ghost? In the eerie surroundings, they nearly believed Shiva's tale. What if Kallu was there and he got angry with them?

Tiger barked sharply, and the children stopped. Was he merely barking without reason, or was he trying to warn them that someone was there? They simply did not know. They stood there uncertainly, trying to decide.

"Tiger!" said Amit finally, very softly. "Tiger! Where are you?"

A loud scream behind them made them turn in shock, their hearts in their mouth. Who was it? Was it the ghost after all? To their utter horror, they saw the terrifying Kallu behind them, holding Rashmi's arm tightly.

"So you've all finally come," he said in a nasty tone. "I was waiting for you. Interfering kids! Wasting my time!"

"Let go of my sister!" said Nikhil in an angry voice, pouncing on Kallu. "Leave her, I say!"

"Don't move!" said Kallu, an extremely unpleasant tone in his voice. Amit shivered as he saw the ugly-looking gun in his hand. "I've a gun, and I won't hesitate to shoot your sister here! All right, go ahead in a straight line, all of

you, one behind the other. You boys make one wrong move, and this girl gets it. Go on!"

Silently cursing their foolishness and wondering what was now going to happen, the three children moved ahead. There was no sign of Tiger. Where had he vanished?



Chapter 13 Inside the Cave

TIGER had suddenly remembered Shiva, and wondered where he was. Quietly, he had slipped away and gone out of the cave, the way they had come in. Shiva was still waiting quietly at the entrance.

"Tiger! Where are the others?" he asked anxiously.

"Woof!" barked Tiger.

Shiva looked to see if the children were following Tiger, but there was no sign of them.

"Tiger! The ghost has eaten them," said Shiva, terrified. "Come on, let's go and get help!"

He got up and ran down the hill towards the bungalow. Maybe there was still time to save the children! Maybe the ghost had not been hungry enough—or maybe it did not eat children! He did not know. All that he knew was that he had to get help.



Back in the cave, the children were sitting sullenly together. They were happy to see Priya safe; but Kallu would not allow them to talk to her. Indeed, he would not even untie the hanky from Priya's mouth.

Kallu did not waste any time with tying them up. He was too busy packing the remaining things. All that he did was keep his gun near him, and make Rashmi sit on a large rock in front of him.

"One wrong move from any of you, or any attempt to escape, and this girl gets it," he snarled. "I'm tired of you. But if you're good, and your old grandparents are willing to part with some money, why then, you'll be back home tonight! If not. . ."

The boys' eyes flashed in anger. What a situation they were in! Oh, why hadn't they been more careful after they had realized that they were heading towards Kallu's cave? They glared at poor Priya. As usual, it was all her fault!

Kallu continued with his packing, looking towards the boys every few minutes. Amit and Nikhil sat quietly, without moving, pretending to be terrified. But slowly, as Kallu got more involved in his packing, the boys began whispering to one another.

"Try to grab the gun when he's busy," muttered Amit.

"I don't know how to use one," muttered Nikhil.

"Doesn't matter. We only have to take it from him. Then it's four against one," muttered Amit again. "Wait for some more time; he's still on guard."

"Here! Shut up! No talking!" snarled Kallu suddenly, picking up his gun. But the boys realized that it was an idle threat; his mind was elsewhere, and he looked worried as he saw all the stuff still lying unpacked.

The children glanced around. All around them were beautiful vases, ancient statues and paintings. There were also some clocks which looked like antiques. There was a fortune in there!

Suddenly with a loud, shrill sound, the phone rang. They all jumped, including Kallu. He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out his mobile phone.

"Yes, I've got the kids. No, no adults know. The packing is nearly done," he told the person at the other end. "What's that? I can't hear you! What? I'll just move...."

Kallu moved a little away so that he could hear better. He'd forgotten his gun on the small

rock. Amit pinched Nikhil lightly. Quick as a flash, the boys pounced on the gun. Amit picked it up and pointed it at Kallu.

"Take away his phone," he hissed to Nikhil.

Within moments the mobile phone had been snatched from Kallu's hand and switched off.

"Now you're our prisoner!" said Amit triumphantly. "Sit quietly in that corner there! Nikky, pick up that stick—thrash him if he moves! And Mr. Kallu, I know how to pull a trigger! We learn shooting at school, so be careful!"

The other children looked at him in surprise; they all knew that he had learnt no such thing. But of course, that was just to keep Kallu in place!

"Rashmi, free Priya! Then off you go, both of you. Come on now!"





Chapter 14

Shiva is a Help!

SHIVA soon reached the bungalow, hoping that Priya's grandparents would be at home. He did not wish to go to the police station or anywhere else. A few tears ran down his cheeks. He was responsible for the children being attacked by the ghost. He should have taken greater care of them. After all, his grandfather had left them in his care when they went for walks! As he neared the house, he saw a jeep standing outside. 'Guests,' he thought. Perhaps they could help!

In the meantime, Rashmi and Priya had also come out of the cave. Priya had not wanted to leave the boys alone with Kallu.

"Go, Priya!" said Amit urgently. "You'll be more of a help outside than here—go and inform Grandpa!"

Rashmi caught hold of her hand and dragged her away.

"Do you know the way?" asked Priya.

Rashmi stopped suddenly. She did not. They had been inside the cave for barely a few minutes before this; and she had not bothered to take much notice of anything. She turned back towards Amit.

"Come on, I'll take you to the entrance," said Amit, impatiently. "Nikky, take care."

The girls were soon out in the open. The moment they saw the entrance and daylight, Amit left them to go back to Nikhil. They ran down the hillside. Would they be on time? What would happen to Amit and Nikhil?

But poor Rashmi and Priya! When Amit had shown them the entrance, he had taken it for granted that they would know how to go home from there. But the girls did not, and in their hurry and fright, they took the wrong path.

After some time, Rashmi stopped. "This does not look familiar at all, Priya," she said worriedly. "Have we lost our way?"

"Don't be silly," said Priya, tripping along. "I'm sure we're right. Anyway, here are some people—we'll ask them."

Before Rashmi could say anything, she had run up to the couple walking up the hill.

"Is this the right way down to that bungalow there, aunty?" she asked. "We're in a hurry. We want to go to the police station. We want to complain."

The couple looked at each other. Before they knew what was happening, Rashmi and Priya were caught by the two, and dragged backwards. Both the man and the woman were heavily built and strong.

"What...what are you doing?" asked Priya in shock.

"I suppose these are the children Kallu was talking about," said the man. "How did they escape? Going to the police indeed! Come along!"

With tears in their eyes, the girls went forlornly towards the cave. What fools they were! They'd messed up such a wonderful chance! Whatever would the boys say? And what would happen now? What was Shiva doing?

Shiva had been very lucky. He had rushed into the house, to find Grandpa and Grandma chatting with three guests.

"Grandpa, Grandpa," panted Shiva, and told the whole story, all jumbled up and confused. No one could understand anything.

"My dear boy, you talk of some Kallu and of a ghost and getting lost—we cannot understand anything," said Grandpa.

"Wait a minute," said one of the guests, whose name was Captain Pradhan. "Is Kallu a bearded man who normally wears black clothes and lives in the town?"

"Yes," said Shiva, nodding his head vigorously.

"Well, then, this needs to be looked into," said the Captain, standing up. "This man is a rogue who often deals in stolen goods. Let's go, Shiva." He turned to Grandpa. "You remain here, sir. We'll contact you if needed. Maybe we'll have to call the police."

"You're not the police?" asked Shiva, looking at their uniforms as they set off briskly.

"No, we're from the army. We're friends of Grandpa," said Captain Pradhan. "We'd just dropped in for a chat."

As they walked uphill, Shiva kept talking all the time.

"Now forget about this ghost business for the time being, young man," said one of the other men. "Just take us to Kallu. I'm sure he himself is the ghost!"

As they neared the caves, Shiva put a finger on his lips. He silently led them inside.

What a scene they saw! A couple of bright lights had been switched on, and there was feverish activity going on. The four children were tied up together in a corner. The three adults were so busy packing and working that they did not even notice the newcomers enter.

The children, of course, saw them, and their eyes widened in surprise. Shiva gave them a bright smile, and put a finger on his lips.

"Need any help, Kallu?" asked Capt. Pradhan softly, standing just behind him.

"Oh, yes, yes! Can you pack this into..." Suddenly Kallu's voice petered off, and he turned—to stare right into the muzzle of a gun held in the Captain's hand.

"Hands up!" said the Captain. "You, others too! Turn around!"

The man and the woman slowly turned around, anger on their faces. But the moment they saw the three sturdy men in their army uniforms, all the fight went out of them. They quickly put their hands up.

"Well, well, a wonderful storage place, I see," said the Captain, looking around. "So this is where all the missing antiques and valuable paintings are hidden! We never would have thought that these old caves could have been used for this purpose. And it was very clever of

you to spread the rumour about ghosts, wasn't it, Kallu? You knew that the villagers would not dare to come here then!"

He turned to smile at the children, who were being freed by Shiva. "But you did not reckon with these smart children did you? I must tell my friend how smart his grandchildren are. And Shiva too."

The children, now free, came running up to him.

"Hello, young ones. And who's Priya?" he said. "Grandpa was sure that all this was her fault. Was it?"

"Yes!" shouted all the others together.

And there we leave them, climbing down the hill. Captain Pradhan has already phoned Grandpa and the police. Kallu is trying to explain his innocence to the Captain. Shiva is still unable to believe that there was no ghost at all in the caves, and that it was only Kallu who had captured the children.

And Priya? There she is, walking right ahead with Tiger. She is not at all sorry about what happened. For wasn't it all because of her that Kallu and his friends were caught, and the precious goods recovered? She was the most wonderful child detective alive!

And what do you think she said when Grandma scolded her?

"But Grandma, I didn't do anything!"

Poor Priya! Even without doing anything, she still gets into trouble, doesn't she?

